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ABSTRACT

This article decries what the authors see as the current obsession with sex role delineation, a result of the feminist movement affecting all areas of male-female relations. They advocate the development of "patterns of accommodation" through increased communication, and cite examples of couples who have achieved it. A discussion of the "male-female confusion" (of sex role perceptions) resulting from women's push into higher education is also submitted. (MHL)

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Symposium: WOMEN'S AND ADOLESCENTS' SELF-CONCEPTS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND THERAPY

ROLE CHANGE: LIBERATING FACT AND FICTION

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Title- Role Change: Liberating Fact and Fiction*

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Over the years the research on sex roles has resulted in an accumulation of facts out of which we have begun to create a fiction, a fiction that relies for its essence on the old cliché of the battle of the sexes. The fiction has reified an artificial distinction between masculine and feminine roles and has consequently failed to come to grips with people in their everyday functioning.

During the past decades, we have seen our social structure shaken to its foundations as divorce rates have zoomed, transient pairings have replaced enduring relationships, juvenile delinquency has spread through all sectors of society and a variety of social ills, particularly alcohol and drug abuse, have symptomized increasing alienation, loneliness and personal disruption. One causal theory that is repeatedly put forward to account for these problems is that of role change; for example the feminine exodus from home environment into the corporate industrial milieu with its associated aftereffect on the equilibrium of sex roles. This neat rationale, supported by the under pinnings, distortions and self serving of certain research findings which further particularize distinctive sex linked behaviors and by recurring waves of nostalgia, evoke a cozy scene lifted out of the yellowing pages of an album, of a tightly knit family group in which each member was firmly aware of his or her immutable roles.

The woman in the picture received only enough education to prepare her for marriage and motherhood; she married early and thereafter devoted herself to the needs and interests of her husband and children. The male in the picture was

*Largely based on "The Man in Your Life" by Anne Steinmann and Elinor Lens, New Life Options: The Working Woman's Resource Book, edited by R. Loring and H. Otto, McGraw Hill, September, 1976.

the responsible citizen, the good worker and provider for the woman and children in the family. Within this framework, in which sex-linked roles and duties were assigned at an early age, men and women were expected to work out their tensions and differences. Today, however, because of women's rising expectations and aspirations, higher education, and self recognition of their untapped abilities, these outworn images and patterns of yesterday are being rapidly discarded. Since custom and tradition no longer prevail in governing male-female behavior, the commitment between the man and the woman must stand on its own, with the tenuous support of guidance growing out of "scientific" research. The burden of proof is now essentially on the individuals who have made the decision to join their lives. In place of the traditional rules, they must develop their own "social contract" which will set out the terms of their particular agreement, and they must recognize that from the moment they enter into this contract neither party can have everything his or her own way. Much of the research in the area of role change, however, does not make the couples' task easier, with its ambivalent insistence that men and women are more different than alike. We are not here considering biological (sexual) differences or their offshoots, but rather behavioral ones. One can find research indicating that boys and large women are more sensitive than men, or that men are more aggressive than women. May we note here, as an illustration of the fact that we are researchers, and we let the chips fall where they may that a very recent study by Kirshner, et. al., (1976) states the following:

Our survey noted, despite attitudinal research suggesting strongly that sex role stereotypes may influence the psychotherapy process, empirical evidence of gender effects in psychotherapy has proven difficult to document. Our present research provides no exception to this pattern in the difficulty of separating effects of gender from other variables and in the interpretation of actual findings. On the other hand, across the analyses of many different items, with multiple variables, female gender consistently turned up in the column of significant results, in virtually total distinction to male gender. We believe, therefore, that an empirical gender effect is supported by our findings, adding weight to the major trends of previous studies: women appear to be both more responsive and effective in psychotherapy than men.

Note, however, that the stereotype of man the aggressor, and woman the passive receiver still has the aura of a subliminal sense of the pejorative -- if women are more sensitive, then men are hapless churls; and if men are more aggressive, women are passively soporose. Again, as researchers, we state a sex difference that does hold up (among others), involves a greater evidence of aggressive behavior among males (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974). But to have role "scientifically" defined by such parameters is harmful to the individuals involved, both alone and in concert, to the extent that communication between them becomes as we shall see more symbolic than real.

The dictionary reminds us that the word "role" aside from its obvious theatre meaning is defined as "a part or function taken or assumed by anyone." Note that this definition has no imputation of value judgement. Remember that an actor, may if he desires, choose a particular role, in order to fulfill his function -- his job. There is no coercion, no determinism involved. In the same manner, depending on societal demands, a person may choose any one of several roles, and to the extent that he or she has the requisite skills, will be adjudged successful at them. What we are really talking about is a person's job or jobs.

Throughout history, people have worked, have had jobs, - in the field, factory and shop - in addition to which, women have borne and raised children. In fact, it is only modern technology and affluence that has made it possible for women to devote themselves full-time to home and family. The pioneer woman who walked beside the conestoga wagon and helped clear the wilderness with axe and rifle; the wife of the small farmer, tradesman and artisan took an equal part with their husbands in the economic and social activities of their small, self-contained community.

But the crucial differences between that world and ours is that, in the earlier period, as among primitive peoples, the work of husband and wife was

*In this regard, the July 1976 issue of Psychological Abstracts lists 69 studies relating to "Sex". Twenty (20) studies are listed under Sex Roles alone.

mutually supportive rather than competitive, and prior to the factory system, the woman worked at home while caring for the children. In our time, when so much of our economic enterprise is conducted by highly organized corporations, there is little room for the kind of sharing that characterized the "mom and pop" enterprises of former times. Today's economic environment, in which nearly all work is performed outside the home, pits men and women against each other for jobs, promotions and other rewards. During their working hours they are encouraged to adopt a code of behavior which is highly individualistic and competitive. They must constantly strive to achieve, to produce, and to prove themselves. Their working existence is determined by the exchange value of what they produce. Their relationships are for the most part impersonal and instrumental and are subject to an organizational hierarchy or pecking order.

On the other hand, there are beginning to be excitingly rewarding exceptions to this trend. In order for these exceptions to become the rule, expectations must be clearly delineated and communications set up in such a manner as to obviate the fiction of stereotyped male/female roles.

For example: Caryl Rivers, in a New York Times Magazine article (1975) states that it is possible to achieve a balance in a marriage (partnership) if one starts "out with a set of expectations that (are not) so far apart." Before the birth of their first child, both wife and husband had been employed as newspaper reporters. There was "equality". With the birth of the second child, however, time for the writer mother to do her free lance writing at home had to be "hoarded". She felt frustrated. Also, when her husband came home he was always exhausted from his news reporting and writing for public television between shows. He had little time to see his children grow; as he said, "he was missing seeing his daughter grow from an infant into a little girl."

The following description of their working through and solution of their mutual dissatisfactions with the way they were living, clearly support the tenet

that continuous open communication between husband and wife and an understanding between them even before marriage on "a set of expectations that weren't so far apart", is vital and probably the only way for both husband and wife to live married and liberated.

This background of mutual understanding brought about a decision to switch roles. The husband received a contract for the book he had long been wanting to write. The wife obtained a full time job teaching at a nearby university. Now, he writes at home on his book - goes through all the complications and disorders of trying to do creative work at home while taking care of two small children. Meanwhile, the wife is the main support of the family. A book contract is a contract - money comes in slowly, and money must come in regularly to support a family of four. Here we have an example of a reversal of stereotyped masculine and feminine roles to which we have been accustomed in our culture. What is important is that there was no identity reversal; the father was clearly the father, the mother, the mother. The fictional stereotype has given way to the fact of the functioning needs of the woman and man in a changing situation. Rivers sums it up beautifully. "If I am a free women, and I believe I am, it is due in no small measure to the fact that I have lived with -- and loved and been nurtured by -- free men." Here we have an example of the healthy dynamics of adaptation for women and men - not role conflict but a smooth adaptation based upon mutual need and open communication.

The fact is that studies on marital status (Astin, Suniewick, Dweck, 1975) of those women who work outside of the home do not show a consistent pattern of better or worse marital adjustment whether the woman works or not, or whether she works from economic necessity or for self realization. One consistent pattern does emerge; that it is important for the working woman to share her two worlds with the man in her life as it is for the working man to share his two

worlds with the woman in his life. We have heard people say that they hesitate to bring their work home with them for fear of appearing overly committed to their jobs. But our research and experience in psychotherapy shows that many times, if women and men are able to share their mutual expectations and feelings with no value judgement reservations, they will find that each will share in the joys and satisfactions as well as the problems and difficulties of each other's working lives. In this way they can shed the fiction of sex stereotypes and relate to each other as people. While the double lives of men and women expand the possibility of potential conflict in their domestic relationship it might more positively open up opportunities for accomodation through understanding and sharing in active communication.

It is clear that the domestic sphere, in contrast to the impersonal corper-
ative organization, calls for an entirely different code of behavior. Here,
relationships are personal and non-instrumental and mutual need and dependence
rather than an organizational chart provide the binding ties. Individualism
in the form of excessive self-interest must yield to a larger concern for the
family unit; disgrace or tragedy for one member falls upon all. This is parti-
cularly true for the nuclear child-centered family which has replaced the ex-
tended kinship group. With parents and children increasingly isolated and on
their own, relationships narrow down and intensify, and parents and children
develop a heavy emotional investment in each other. The path to accomodation
is often blocked by petty irritations and frustrations that are part of the
daily lives of people living together. The exaggerated importance of apparent-
ly trifling things: the baby-sitter who doesn't show up on time, the repeated-
ly late dinner hour, the house which looks like a disaster area - aris out
of the research engendered sex rolo stereotypy. If one is concerned about her
"femininity" or her husband about his "masculinity", as defined by the fiction
growing out of the professional and lay literature, they will both seek for clearer

definition wherever they can find it. To wit, who does the dishes becomes a battle field fraught with symbolic significance.

Daily living together brings out all our individual quirks, and as we well know, individual quirks are not always compatible. Trivialities, compounded over and over again in "togetherness" can develop into big troublemakers. He squeezes the toothpaste tube in the middle or leaves the top off. She leaves her hairbrush on the bathroom counter, and it has strands of hair on it. Can conflicts arise over such minutiae? Yes! To the degree that each one has identified the incident with the stereotyped fiction of male and female role responsibility, the conflict becomes more intensified.

Like so many men and women who are struggling to "make it together" they are communicating in two different languages; to paraphrase Mathew Arnold - one dying and one waiting to be born. The language waiting to be born is one of mutual understanding sired by a technocracy of competing individuals in which women are striving to find their place. However, as women claim an equal place in these arenas, the male is left wondering who he is and what it is he should be doing.

Is it any wonder that men sometimes echo Freud's famous question: What does a woman want? But the question should be rephrased: what do men and women want? And if the answer is that they want what all women and men want and what so many people seeking marital counseling say they want, in which companionship, loving attitude and common interests and goals top the list - then the next step is to begin developing patterns of accommodation. These patterns, which flow out of open communication between the sexes, should be sufficiently flexible so that they can be adapted to changing needs and expectations throughout life. To the degree that communicating ceases to exist ambiguity in defining the so-called appropriate feminine and/or masculine roles increases.

Initial data from the research on perceptions of the male sex role (Steinmann, Fox, Farkas, 1967) reflect the same paradox identified in our research on female

roles: both sexes had the same ideal image, yet neither sex had an accurate perception of how the other feels. The discrepancy between the image of an ideal man which men attributed to women and the ideal to which women actually ascribe, is particularly dramatic, since men's predictions are as far on the family-oriented or traditional side of the scale as women's actual ideal is on the self-oriented or achievement oriented side.

What is suggested by the data is that the preoccupation in recent years in both lay and professional circles with the role confusion of women as they move into new areas of interest and activity have ignored comparable confusion on male roles. These data suggest further that the communication between the sexes as to what they indeed do want for themselves and for each other has been no more effective for males than it has been for females.

The breakdown in communication is society's problem. Our own data of over a period of more than 20 years suggest that:

One factor which might be contributing to the male-female confusion in role concept is woman's push toward higher education. Cross-culturally, women indicate that they feel that the men in their particular cultures desire a woman who is extremely nurturant and places her wifely and familial duties before her own personal growth and development. The Maferr studies have shown that as the woman's level of education rises, the gap in communication between the sexes seems to become greater. This raises an obvious question: "To alleviate the problem, do we curtail education for women?" Of course not; that is a ridiculous solution. What we must do is raise and increase levels of education within society as a whole and particularly among men as to the content, cause, and possible solutions for the discrepancies in masculine and feminine role concepts. Perhaps then, society's enlightenment might tend to close the communication gap between the sexes. It is well to remember that society is made up of men and women, and each man and woman is society.

In sum (and infact) the research tends to indicate that the conflict for women attempting to combine both family and self-achieving roles exists. It is not just a plank for Women's Liberation. It is a problem shared by women and men. Men, too, must try to combine family oriented and self-achieving roles. Conflict will remain until both men and women change static and stereotyped attitudes about male and female roles that do not benefit them and, further, the conflict will remain until they change social institutions to make it easier for men and women to communicate and understand each other better (Steinmann, 1975).

The role-construct is complicated, by the intrusion of certain sexual labels. Aside from purely biological functions it is really meaningless to talk about feminine and masculine roles. Work and its demands in various cultures are what change the meaning of role constructs. Although today considered primarily as "feminine" activity knitting historically appears "to have been taught to the world by men - the traders of Arabia and the sailors of the Mediterranean." It was in fact the son of a Scottish king (St. Fiare) who was adopted as the patron saint of the French guild of stocking knitters in 1527 (Thomas, 1972). Hence, in certain countries in which men have traditionally knit, knitting is then considered a masculine role. If in other cultures knitting is always done by women, it is then considered woman's work -- a feminine role. However, it must be recognized that traditional roles are not the only jobs people can perform. To the extent that people lack skills to assume other functions, and only to that extent, are they locked into these jobs. Seen in this way, our professional concern should not be with the difficulties men and women may or may not encounter in assuming different role (jobs), but should be in facilitating the ease with which newer, non-traditional jobs (roles) can be acquired. The antagonism that the women's liberation movement has met with in some quarters, is not over liberation per se, but rather that there are women who prefer, and are successful at, the arduous job of housewife-mother - a role many of them have chosen.

It is undoubtedly true that among other things, one's self concept is a function of one's role, the job, assumed or assigned. And if one's job is considered less by the culture, the individual considers herself or himself less. In terms of the fluid society in which we now live, roles as jobs must be seen as flexible and interchangeable. When approached this way, the labels "masculine" or "feminine" when applied to a job, are merely descriptive. One could just as easily call them "snark" and "boojum" and be rid of any sense of the perjorative. In our roles as professionals, it is therefore incumbent upon us to liberate the role construct, by clearly differentiating fact from fiction.

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